Returning to Iran: Challenges and Promises

Iran’s brain drain trend has been the topic of much concern and conversation in and outside of Iran. Most statistics suggest that a large number of Iran’s elite students and university graduates leave the country and do not return. But there is a minority who selects a different path, and returns to Iran. A recent qualitative study by Iranian Studies Group at MIT looks at the motivations, success, and satisfaction of this group:

- Why do they return to Iran after completion of their studies abroad?
- Are they happy with their decision? How successful have they been in reaching their goals?
- What have been the biggest challenges?
- What have been the biggest benefits?
- What are the main lessons to learn from their experience?

This study explores the factors that contribute to success and satisfaction of individuals who return to Iran upon completion of their studies, or after spending some time working abroad. Interviews with a number of different individuals who has returned to Iran in the last couple of decades and have made contributions to academic and business life, as well as individuals who have had a negative experience with their decision to return, informs this study. The interviews are analyzed with an eye on common themes and useful insights that can help those who make a decision on returning to Iran in near future.

The results suggest that returning to Iran is a decision often motivated by emotional and patriotic connections to Iran rather than rational calculations. Moreover, level of satisfaction differed across participants and correlated with their success in achieving their career and social goals in Iran. People who tried to build institutions or their own businesses had a higher chance of feeling satisfied with their success.

The study also suggests that cultural and structural barriers to working effectively have been the biggest challenges to most while emotional ties and outstanding students have contributed positively to the experience of these individuals. The report concludes with recommendations for individuals who plan to return to Iran after studying/living in the west. To view the full report, please visit: http://web.mit.edu/isg